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THE MEXICAN IMAGE IN AMERICAN TRAVEL  
LITERATURE, 1831-1869

RAYMUND A. PAREDES

IN THE EARLY nineteenth century, Mexico—with its vast uncharted territories, its enormous stores of natural resources, and its exotic mixture of racial types—became a major focus of interest for many Americans. Despite this curiosity, information about Mexico accumulated slowly in the United States. The first major account of contemporary Mexican life by an American, Zebulon Pike's *An Account of Expeditions* . . . , did not appear until 1810, and the second such report, Joel Poinsett's celebrated *Notes on Mexico*, was not published until 1824. Little wonder, then, that some contemporary American writers characterized Mexico as a *terra incognita*, a land in Thomas Jefferson's phrase, "almost locked up from the knowledge of man."<sup>1</sup>

Starting in the 1830s, however, information about Mexico and its people became available to Americans in unprecedented quantities. Much of it was provided by numerous travel narratives of Americans who journeyed into areas largely populated by Mexicans. Some works were little more than personal journals which described life in the southwestern wilderness, while other narratives sometimes called literary chronicles were virtually condensed encyclopedias including political history, geography, climate, and wildlife. In any case, American travelers were fascinated by Mexican character and culture and provided elaborate accounts of their impressions. This body of literature flourished for over

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thirty years, declining only as these areas became familiar territory to Americans. Meanwhile, these works attracted a wide readership—some even achieving best-sellers status—and laid the foundation for enduring American concepts of Mexican character.

Because information had been so scarce, early American travelers had little idea of what to expect from the Mexicans. For example, James Ohio Pattie, a trapper who traveled extensively in Mexico between 1824 and 1830, anticipated no major differences between the Mexicans and his own people apart from language. He imagined the Mexicans to be European in appearance and culture and even referred consistently to them as "Spaniards." Reality proved startling to the Yanqui.<sup>2</sup> In his well-known *Personal Narrative*, Pattie wrote that he was most immediately repelled by the Mexicans' dark complexions, and then proceeded to describe other disturbing characteristics. The Mexicans, he reported, were envious, addicted to gambling, and rather loose in their morals. These were only secondary flaws, however. The most grievous qualities of Mexican character were revealed to Pattie one drab November day in New Mexico. He recalled riding with a company of Mexican cavalry in pursuit of marauding Indians. A battle developed, but the Mexicans had no taste for this dangerous business and left the field to their Yanqui allies. When the issue was decided, however, the Mexicans moved in, trampling Indian corpses and killing the wounded. This cowardice and cruelty frequently stood in gloomy contrast to Yanqui bravery and humaneness in Pattie's narrative. "The Americans were not Mexicans," he wrote after a later exhibition of Mexican cowardice, "to stand at the corner of a house and hide their guns behind the side of it, while they looked the other way, and pulled the trigger."<sup>3</sup> As Pattie continued his trek through the Mexican badlands, his assessment of Mexican character never wandered far from this fundamental proposition. As a number of historians have indicated, Pattie was not the most reliable of reporters,<sup>4</sup> but he nonetheless set the tone for later Americans.

Like Pattie, a number of American travelers entered Mexico on the Santa Fe Trail which opened in 1821. Albert Pike, a New

Englander of Puritan background (a combination rarely favorably disposed to Mexicans) entered New Mexico in 1831 and promptly experienced a severe case of cultural shock. Pike understood little of what he saw and ignorance quickly hardened into resentment. Virtually everything about New Mexico repelled the New Englander. It was a "different world," its prairies appearing at times to Pike as "bleak, black and barren wastes undulating in gloomy loneliness."<sup>5</sup> Santa Fe was a filthy and dull city of mud. The natives seemed to Pike perfect players for such a setting. He wrote that New Mexicans were "peculiarly blessed with ugliness,"<sup>6</sup> and that none, so far as he could determine, was "ever known to possess either honor or virtue."<sup>7</sup>

A more balanced assessment of the New Mexicans came from Josiah Gregg, whose *Commerce on the Prairies* (1844) remains a classic of western Americana. Gregg flourished as a Santa Fe trader for nine years and, during that time, studied Mexican culture carefully. Unlike Pattie and Pike, he found a good deal to admire among New Mexicans. He considered the inhabitants uniformly charming and hospitable and noted numerous examples of intelligence, industry, and beauty among them. Gregg even defended the New Mexicans against the familiar charge of cowardice, arguing that they lacked not courage, but only sound leadership and weaponry to distinguish themselves in battle.

On other questions of New Mexican life and character, Gregg was less complimentary. He believed the provincial government to be a slough of corruption and the general state of civilization only slightly advanced beyond savagery. Ultimately, Gregg's conclusion was contemptuous:

The New Mexicans appear to have inherited much of the cruelty and intolerance of their ancestors, and no small portion of their bigotry and fanaticism. Being of a highly imaginative temperament and of rather accommodating moral principles—cunning, loquacious, quick of perception and sycophantic, their conversation frequently exhibits a degree of tact—a false glare of talent eminently calculated to mislead and impose. They have no stability except in artifice, no profundity except for intrigue; qualities for which they have acquired an unenviable celebrity. Systematically cringing and sub-

servient while out of power, as soon as the august mantle of authority falls upon their shoulders, there are but little bounds to their arrogance and vindictiveness of spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Gregg attributed the Mexicans' decadence to the persistence of Spanish and Catholic influences. Spanish domination, suggested Gregg, provided no lessons in republican government. The Catholic church only encouraged obsequiousness and superstition. Consequently, the Mexicans lived "in darkness and in ignorance,"<sup>9</sup> victims of their oppressive heritage.

Hispanophobia and anti-Catholicism, so manifest in Gregg's work, were commonplace among American travelers who ventured into Mexico. Such sentiments had a long history in the United States. Anglo-American hispanophobia dated from the seventeenth century when, as patriotic Englishmen, the colonists of Jamestown and Massachusetts Bay retained their traditional resentment of the Spaniards and sought to check further advances by their New World enemies. Over the years, bad feelings remained intense.<sup>10</sup> Well into the nineteenth century, many Americans considered Spaniards innately rapacious, cruel, and treacherous and assumed that these vices had been visited on the Spaniards' colonial subjects, the Mexicans. A distaste for Catholicism was as entrenched as hispanophobia, and was, of course, closely related to it. Significantly, the surge of American penetrations into Mexico came at a time when anti-Catholic fervor in the United States was particularly virulent.<sup>11</sup> New Mexico, as the oldest northern Spanish colony and as a region with its special brand of aberrant Catholicism proved rather too barbarous and exotic for many visiting Yanquis.<sup>12</sup>

Although literary assessments of Mexican character emanating from every sector of the American West were unfavorable, those reports from Texas were particularly so. Cultural and political relations had been strained from the moment Americans first colonized Texas and, as the years passed, animosities only grew worse. Texas Anglos looked upon their struggle to remove Mexican dominance not only as a blow for American expansionism, but also as a kind

of holy war between saints and sinners. Consequently, Texas narratives are colored by a distinctive combination of sanctimoniousness, arrogance, and vindictiveness, qualities that became more marked after the Texas Revolution of 1836.

A number of Texas narratives became well-known to Americans, one of which was Mary Austin Holley's *Texas: Observations, Historical, Geographical, and Descriptive* (1833). Mrs. Holley, a cousin of Stephen F. Austin, owned land in Texas and sought to attract American settlers to the region. She emphasized that Mexicans were unfit to hold land, and were, by a happy coincidence, so cowardly that they might abandon their properties at the first sign of an Anglo-American with a pistol on his side. Holley wrote that Texas Mexicans

are very ignorant and degraded, and generally speaking, timid and irresolute; and a more brutal and, at the same time, more cowardly set of men does not exist than the Mexican soldiery. They are held in great contempt by the American settlers, who assert that five Indians will chase twenty Mexicans, but five Anglo-Americans will chase twenty Indians. . . . The Mexicans are commonly very indolent, of loose morals, and, if not infidels of which there are many, involved in the grossest superstition. This view exhibits why it is by no means wonderful that this people have been the dupes and slaves of so many masters, or that the plans of intelligent and patriotic men, for the political regeneration of Mexico, have here to fore entirely failed.<sup>13</sup>

In this passage, Holley established a hierarchy of bravery in Texas; first, Anglos, then Indians, and finally Mexicans—a ranking with which later Anglo observers would not quarrel. Mrs. Holley was one of those ambitious Texans who dreamed on the grandest scale. An ardent supporter of the Texas Republic, she envisioned the day when the new nation might extend its influence to the Pacific behind an army of Anglo-Texans who would toss aside the “narrowness and bigotry” of any Mexican protesters.

The Texas Revolution and its ten-year aftermath which finally culminated in the Mexican War, inspired a large volume of anti-

Mexican rhetoric. For the Texas writers, the "butchery" at the Alamo and Goliad dispelled any lingering doubts of Mexican cruelty and treachery, while the succeeding fiasco at San Jacinto, in which a careless Mexican force was easily overrun by Texas patriots, dramatically confirmed the ineptitude of Mexican soldiery. The Mexican president and general, Antonio López de Santa Anna—that "infuriate Attila"<sup>14</sup>—became a favorite villain in Texas narratives, as well as a model for fictional scoundrels. This was a time when any story—no matter how improbable—which cast the Mexicans in a bad light found an audience. One popular fantasy, which dealt with a scene after the San Jacinto battle, was repeated in several variations by a number of Texas writers, this by Noah Smithwick:

The dead Mexicans lay in piles, the survivors not even asking permission to bury them, thinking, perhaps, that in return for the butchery they had practiced, they would soon be lying dead themselves. The buzzards and coyotes were gathering to the feast, but it is a singular fact that they singled out the dead horses, refusing to touch the Mexicans, presumably because of the peppery constitution of the flesh. They lay there unmolested and dried up, the cattle got to chewing the bones, which so affected the milk that residents in the vicinity had to dig trenches and bury them.<sup>15</sup>

After Texas independence, hostilities between Anglo-Texans and Mexicans continued with hardly a lull, the most notable incidents being a series of military expeditions back and forth across the contested border. Several Texan thrusts into Mexican territory ended ingloriously with large numbers of Anglos being captured and imprisoned, sometimes after a series of public humiliations. When the more fortunate of these prisoners won their freedom—largely through American diplomatic pressures—there quickly followed numerous accounts of their adventures. Unquestionably, the most celebrated of these chronicles was that of George Wilkins Kendall, a veteran of the ill-fated Texas expedition to Santa Fe in 1841, a journalist and self-styled press agent for the Republic of Texas.

In his *Narrative of the Texan Santa Fe Expedition* (1844), Kendall repeated some tired characterizations of the Mexicans—for example, he labelled them an “anti-go-a-head race”—but he also presented to his readers the most memorable Mexican villain in American travel literature up to that time, one Dimosio Salezar [Salazar?]. Salezar was captain of the Mexican troops who marched the Texas prisoners from outside Santa Fe to El Paso, and according to Kendall, a brute “whose only delight was in cruelty and blood.”<sup>16</sup> Salezar harassed the hapless Texans incessantly, goading them to some foolish response for which he would beat or shoot them. On the march to El Paso he countenanced no stragglers; these were shot immediately, after which their ears were cut off and their bodies tossed indifferently along the roadside. Kendall allowed that Salezar’s brutality was excessive even by Mexican standards and noted that he was finally arrested in El Paso for his crimes. Still, the implication remains that Salezar was remarkable only in degree, being the ultimate villain in a country conspicuous for producing them. Kendall concluded that the Mexicans “possessed all the vices of savage life without one of the virtues that civilization teaches.”<sup>17</sup>

Kendall’s work was by no means the most vehement captivity narrative. Thomas Jefferson Green, captured on the south bank of the Río Grande at Mier, wrote that cruelty practiced by Mexicans against Texans was “unprecedented in the history of civilized nations.”<sup>18</sup> So depraved were Mexicans, reported Green, that Texans were little bothered by killing them. He noted that a fellow soldier “had killed his score of Mexicans with less compunction of conscience than if he had killed so many vipers,”<sup>19</sup> and Green himself could “maintain a better stomach at the killing of a Mexican than at the killing of [a body louse].”<sup>20</sup>

Unquestionably, Texas writers had some good reasons for despising the Mexicans. The massacre of Texas volunteers at Goliad, for example, was an outrage and indefensible; on other occasions, Mexican deportment was similarly barbarous. But Anglo-Texan hatred of Mexicans exceeded its possible justification. Texas writers often denigrated the entire Mexican population



for the actions of a few and ignored precipitous actions by their own people which compelled violent Mexican responses.

Texas narratives had a significant effect on development of American attitudes toward Mexico at the precise moment when justification was being sought for eventual invasion of that land. As literary propagandists, Texas writers regularly contrasted Mexican depravity with Anglo virtue and argued convincingly that Mexicans were fitting objects of conquest and humiliation. American volunteers in the Mexican War frequently cited the "outrages" at the Alamo, Goliad, and Mier as providing incentive and vindication for destruction of Mexicans.<sup>21</sup>

Somewhat different in tone from Texas writers were the California chroniclers who often placed less emphasis on alleged Mexican cruelty and cowardice and focused on what they perceived as a rather extraordinary inherent indolence. Richard Henry Dana, whose *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) was an instant classic, regarded Mexican laziness as a national affliction, which he dubbed "California fever." Surveying California's natural wealth, he concluded that only its people's character prevented the region from becoming great. Dana attributed a substantial portion of the Mexicans' laziness to Catholicism, the observance of which included the celebration of an interminable series of religious holidays. Dana deplored this wasteful foolishness and commented: "There's no danger of Catholicism's spreading in New England unless the Church cuts down her holidays. Yankees can't afford the time."<sup>22</sup> Happily, Dana noted, American settlers were making their way to California and quickly acquiring property and getting "nearly all the trade in their hands."<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, Dana saw California Mexicans as people plummeting towards their doom. Time had passed them by; they clung foolishly to outdated customs, oblivious to inexorable laws of progress and change, squandering the natural wealth of the region. Their fortunes were spent, their energies dissipated in marathon fandangos and other frivolous recreations. The decline of the Californians was so precipitous that Dana suggested that they were "a people on whom a curse had fallen, and stripped them of every-

thing but their pride, their manners, and their voices."<sup>24</sup> Dana painted a landscape of gloomy decadence; later, back in Massachusetts, he would recall California as that "hated" and "half-civilized" coast.

Readers might have expected a more positive assessment of California life from Alfred Robinson, a long-time resident of Santa Barbara and San Francisco and the husband of a native Californian. Robinson obviously admired a number of Mexicans, and he spoke highly of the general level of hospitality and kindness in California, but on the whole his impressions were unfavorable. The Mexicans seemed constantly to assault his New England sensibilities. They were, Robinson reported, mischievous, foolish, and incompetent, not unlike children. Furthermore, they were stupendously lazy. "You might as well expect," Robinson wrote, "a sloth to leave a tree that has one inch of bark left upon its trunk, as to expect a Californian to labor whilst a *real* glistens in his pocket."<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, Robinson much preferred Mexican women to the men. He applauded the California women for their great beauty and steadfast virtue; "perhaps there are a few places in the world," he gushed, "where, in proportion to the number of inhabitants, can be found more chastity, industrious habits, and correct deportment, than among the women of this place."<sup>26</sup> American travelers almost unanimously considered the Mexican women to be incomparably superior to the men, although Robinson's prudent notation of their prevailing chastity was not often repeated. Life on the Mexican frontier could be excruciatingly lonely and it was a bloodless Yanqui indeed who did not succumb—grudgingly but inevitably—to the charms of the Mexican señoritas.

In mid-nineteenth century American travel literature there were few friendly assessments of Mexican character; one of these, however, was by another visitor to California, Walter Colton. Colton was a Congregationalist minister who served a term as *alcalde* of Monterey during which he exhibited little of the disdain shown by other New Englanders for Mexican Catholics. In his *Three Years in California* (1850), Colton characterized the Mexicans as exemplars of romantic primitivism. Their most notable qualities

were an irrepressible hedonism, generosity, gaiety, hospitality, and kindness. Like other American travelers, Colton considered the Californios to be indolent, an understandable flaw among a people living in an American paradise, where Nature "rolls almost everything spontaneously into their lap[s]." <sup>27</sup> Colton noted that the Californians were generally unconcerned with material gain and provided a contrast to the hordes of greedy Yanqui gold seekers. Whereas Dana and Robinson judged the Californios to be decadent, Colton found them refreshingly uncorrupted by modern civilization. In his mind, the Californios were a vanishing species of primitive man, charming and picturesque, but condemned by their inability to adjust to an approaching tide of American influences. Colton's assessment of Mexican character was marred by a persistent trace of condescension, but at least he mourned—as most Yanqui travelers did not—the Californians' passing from the American landscape.

Other American travelers shared Colton's admiration for the Californians, a situation which, ironically, presented a dilemma. How was the reality of Californian virtue to be made consistent with prevailing notions of Mexican depravity? Several writers argued that because of California's climate and environment, the natives were, in effect, "super" Mexicans, more vigorous and more virtuous than their southern brethren. Others explained that Californians, living far away from the Mexican heartland, had been uncontaminated by miscegenation and thus were pure-blooded descendants of Spanish conquerors; inferior to Anglo-Saxons to be sure, but superior to the Mexican half-breeds. Bayard Taylor, well-known Yanqui traveler, wrote:

The Californians, as a race, are vastly superior to the Mexicans. They have larger frames, stronger muscles, and a fresh, ruddy complexion, entirely different from the sallow skins of the tierra caliente or the swarthy features of those Bedouins of the West, the Sonorians [sic]. The families of pure Castilian blood resemble in features and build the descendants of the Valencians in Chili [sic] and Mexico, whose original physical superiority over the natives of the other provinces of Spain has not been obliterated by two hundred years of transplanting.<sup>28</sup>

John Russell Bartlett, the United States Boundary Commissioner from 1850 to 1853, also ranked California Castilians above common Mexicans. In some cases such distinctions were encouraged by Californians themselves, many of whom harbored their own racial prejudices. At any rate, Californians as a group were the least despised of Mexicans, largely because of a growing mythology of racial purity.<sup>29</sup>

Before 1846, most American travel accounts described life in the northern Mexican territories—California, New Mexico, Texas—but several important narratives focused on the people of the Mexican heartland. Unfortunately, they were no more insightful than those from other areas. For example, Waddy Thompson, who served as United States minister to Mexico from 1842 to 1844, described the Mexicans as being generally “lazy, ignorant, and of course, vicious and dishonest.”<sup>30</sup> Like other Yanquis, Thompson complimented the Mexicans for their congeniality but finally regarded them as degraded. He considered Mexicans to be deeply scarred by Spanish occupation and the resulting legacy of Catholicism, which he found “revolting in its disgusting mummeries and impostures.”<sup>31</sup> Surprisingly, Thompson had a few words of praise for Santa Anna, the favorite Mexican villain of the period. He described the General as a man “of many high and generous qualities” whose vices were mostly “attributable to his country and education.”<sup>32</sup> Human virtue, it seemed, seldom passed untainted through the harsh Mexican environment.

Another well-known visitor to the Mexican interior, Albert Gilliam, shared many of Thompson’s views. In his *Travels Over the Tablelands and Cordilleras of Mexico* (1846), he denounced the “faithlessness and dishonour of the Mexicans.”<sup>33</sup> Like other travelers, Gilliam was fond of self-serving exaggerations: Americans, he wrote, had “advanced two thousand years ahead of [the Mexicans], not only in agriculture but in all the arts and sciences practiced in the civilized world.”<sup>34</sup> And like other reporters, only when his attention centered on the native women did Gilliam become enthusiastic about Mexico. He greatly complimented the señoritas for their beauty, charm, and affection, occasionally to the point of silliness. In Mexico City, Gilliam found himself staring at one

especially striking beauty and rhapsodizing that her dark hair, light brunette complexion, and "soft and inexpressibly melting black eyes were playing havoc with my susceptible heart."<sup>35</sup> Later, he announced: "I could almost say that to see [a Mexican woman] is to love her."<sup>36</sup>

Probably the most knowledgeable and certainly the most compassionate American traveler in Mexico before 1846 was Brantz Mayer, secretary of the United States legation in 1841 and 1842, who eventually gained a national reputation for his studies of Mexican history. In *Mexico, As It Was and As It Is* (1844), Mayer indicated that American impressions of Mexico were distorted by prejudice and misunderstanding; he himself had gone to Mexico "with opinions anything but favorable to the morals, tastes, or habits of the people."<sup>37</sup> Contrary to his expectations, Mayer found Mexicans to be "kind, gentle, hospitable, intelligent, benevolent, and brave,"<sup>38</sup> and he denounced those travelers who rendered judgments on Mexican character from the "unsympathizing distance of the hotel and ballroom." Mayer considered himself one of the few American travelers who had surveyed Mexican society from within and thus been able to present an authentic portrait. He cautioned critics to put aside their anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic biases and to guard against the "egotism of national prejudices."<sup>39</sup>

Despite his generous praise, Mayer was no apologist for Mexico. He criticized the continuing oppression of the Indians, the insensitivity of the Catholic Church to the needs of the poor, and the widespread lawlessness. Still, Mayer insisted American writers made too much of Mexican vices while taking little note of their virtues. His achievement was to present a balanced assessment of Mexican character.

Unfortunately, Mayer's thoughtful judgments made little impact on general American attitudes; by the early 1840s, these were already firmly established, and pointedly unfavorable. After the Mexican War commenced in 1846, the resultant deluge of anti-Mexican rhetoric only confirmed and reformulated negative impressions long in circulation (indeed, the United States's invasion

of Mexico is partially attributable to widespread American opinion that Mexicans were miserable and degraded and proper objects of humiliation).

The Mexican War inspired many personal narratives of travels, including John T. Hughes's *Doniphan's Expedition* (1848). Hughes never questioned the justice of the American cause and regarded Mexicans either as foils to America's moral superiority or as rude meddlers in the business of American expansion. Hughes was familiar with various western chronicles and listed the "indiscriminate murder of all Texans who fell into Mexican hands"<sup>40</sup> as a cause that justified war. Hughes showed striking contempt for the Mexican Army which in his view had no stomach for engaging the enemy, and troubled Doniphan's army not nearly so much as the mosquitoes and black gnats that swarmed over the southwestern prairies.

Like other southwestern travelers, Hughes wrote that the Mexicans were inferior to regional Indian tribes. The Zuni, for example, seemed much more industrious than the Mexicans, while the Navajo were described as "the nobles of American aborigines" and "a highly civilized people. . . of a higher order. . . than the mass of their neighbors, the Mexicans."<sup>41</sup> The Indians were as aware of this superiority as was Hughes; invariably, the Missourian noted, they treated the Mexicans with scorn.

Another Doniphan expedition chronicler, Frank S. Edwards, shared many of Hughes's impressions. In Edwards's mind, Mexicans represented the lowest possible human degeneracy. They were "debased in all moral sense,"<sup>42</sup> he wrote, and comprised "the meanest, most contemptible set of swarthy thieves and liars to be found anywhere."<sup>43</sup> Edwards also complained that Mexicans were dirty and infected with vermin. Unlike Hughes, however, Edwards did not uniformly applaud the good conduct of the Americans but rather noted several Yanqui atrocities, particularly among the Texans, who hated Mexicans so bitterly that they shot "every one they met."<sup>44</sup>

Occasionally, war chroniclers displayed sympathy for their adversaries. For example, not all writers insisted that Mexicans were

cowardly. Captain W. S. Henry, marching with Zachary Taylor, remarked that the Mexicans "fought like devils," while others explained that the Mexicans' battlefield performance was due not to cowardice, but to poor training, equipment and leadership. Several writers noted the bedraggled condition of Mexican troops, and Marcellus B. Edwards, an enlisted man with Doniphan, reported that the Mexicans were desperate enough to exchange their arms for bread.<sup>45</sup> Another reason given for the Mexicans' hesitance to fight was that they simply never understood the war's purpose. In their isolation, they knew nothing of the various issues involved.

While most chroniclers viewed the war as a tribute to American racial, cultural, and spiritual superiority, others wondered about its justice. The Yanquis were often stunned by the Mexicans' hospitality—strange behavior for an allegedly bitter enemy. W. S. Henry was disturbed by the sheer brutality of hostilities; everywhere his senses were assailed by piles of rotting corpses. "I must confess I am tired of this work," he wrote, "and long to see an honorable peace."<sup>46</sup> Sometimes the American invasion of Mexico seemed an exercise in needless cruelty. Mexicans, after all, were impoverished and ignorant, and hardly needed further lessons in humility. Lieutenant Raphael Semmes of Winfield Scott's army in the Mexican interior noted the tragic incongruity of a battlefield scene: the smoke had dissipated and the gunfire had died away; Semmes saw his comrades exulting over their victory, while nearby, "a few Mexicans were groveling. . . for such articles of small value as they could glean from the wreck. Poor wretches," the lieutenant continued, "I could not help pitying them!"<sup>47</sup>

It is a common phenomenon in warfare that invading soldiers imagine themselves greatly admired by women of the occupied nation. In the Mexican War, American troops described the extraordinary hospitality of the Mexican women, whose charm contrasted with the men's depravity. Adolph Wislizenus, a doctor attached to the Doniphan force, found the women of New Mexico "active, affectionate, open-hearted, and even faithful when their affections are reciprocated," while the men struck him as demon-

strating "indolence, mendacity, treachery, and cruelty."<sup>48</sup> To hear the American soldiers tell it, Mexican women were also aware of their men's deficiency and much preferred the companionship of Yanquis. Occasionally, an American found the señoritas too affectionate for his taste. Frank Edwards wrote that the women of Santa Fe "did not seem to know what virtue or modesty is."<sup>49</sup> Understandably this was not a general complaint, and most American soldiers apparently regarded the Mexican women as pleasant diversions.<sup>50</sup>

Despite occasional displays of compassion and sensitivity, most American soldiers ultimately saw the Mexican War as a natural and pardonable development in the national destiny. Whatever the carnage and devastation, the consensus was that the Mexicans actually benefitted from the American presence, both economically and morally. A Pennsylvanian called the war "the religious execution of our country's glorious mission, under the direction of Divine Providence, to civilize and Christianize, and raise up from anarchy and degradation a most ignorant, indolent, wicked and unhappy people";<sup>51</sup> most soldier chroniclers would have agreed.

The American belief that Mexicans could one day rise to a tolerable level of civilization dated from the early nineteenth century and rested on the assumption that Mexican debasement was largely the result of Spanish colonialism and could be overcome with time, patience, and proper motivation. Some American writers, gaining support as the century wore on, argued that the Mexicans' defects were too tenacious and too egregious to be explained away in terms of environmental factors. Generally, the new answers turned on the issue of race.

Charting Mexican racial characteristics proved extremely difficult for American observers; even the relatively simple question of skin color triggered wide disagreement. In most instances, the Mexican was described as either brown-skinned or swarthy; other times, writers described his complexion as similar to that of the Indians. Comparisons with blacks were also common. One writer, Rufus Sage, noted that the Mexicans were as "black as veritable



Negroes, and needed only the curly hair, thick lips, and flattened nose, to define the genuine Congo in appearance."<sup>52</sup> During the 1850s when many fugitive slaves found asylum in Mexico and intermarried with the natives, such comparisons became even more frequent, particularly in Texas, where the large number of Southerners were quick to perceive similarities between the Mexican and Negro.<sup>53</sup> Several writers described the Mexican as being olive-skinned, while Samuel Hammett, a western novelist, presented a character who contemptuously described a Mexican as a "yaller nigger."<sup>54</sup> Amid the confusion, one fact was clear; whatever the Mexican's skin color, it was not white. The noted historian, Francis Parkman, articulated this sentiment as straightforwardly as anyone. The human race in the American West, he wrote, "is separated into three divisions, arranged in order of their merits: white men, Indians, and Mexicans; to the latter of whom the honorable title of 'whites' is by no means conceded."<sup>55</sup> Although the modern Mexican's racial characteristics fascinated a large number of American travelers, he himself was never widely studied by ethnologists. Rather, many racial principles applied to Mexicans were modified versions of theories developed while studying Indian and Negro populations. The most important development in ethnological theory which affected American attitudes toward Mexicans dealt with miscegenation. As the eighteenth century concept of the "unity of man" gave way to theories emphasizing racial differences,<sup>56</sup> the implications of miscegenation became paramount. A leading American ethnologist, Josiah C. Nott, wrote that the study of human physical history demonstrated clearly that "the superior race must inevitably become deteriorated by an intermixing with the inferior,"<sup>57</sup> and other scientists agreed. Some ethnologists argued that miscegenation was especially pernicious because progeny inherited only the worst characteristics. This last idea made a huge impact on those western writers who reported on Mexican character. Scottish historian William Robertson contended in the eighteenth century that, given the nature of the parent stock, inheriting even the very best of Spanish and native Indian characteristics hardly

promised a distinguished offspring, and the possibility of inheriting only the worst traits augured a new level of human depravity.<sup>58</sup>

American travelers were aware that racial mixing was proceeding at a rapid pace in Mexico, and were exceedingly skeptical about this phenomenon. As early as 1808, a mariner visiting California, William Shaler, referred contemptuously to Mexican "mixed-breeds."<sup>59</sup> Later, as American ethnologists developed elaborate theories describing the dangers of miscegenation, more American travelers came to see mixed heritage as basic to Mexican depravity. Thomas J. Farnham, for example, presented a popular racial evaluation of Mexican character when he wrote in 1844:

No one acquainted with the indolent, mixed race of California, will ever believe that they will populate, much less, for any length of time, govern the country. The law of Nature, which curses the mulatto here with a constitution less robust than that of either race from which he sprang, lays a similar penalty upon the mingling of the Indian and white races in California and Mexico. They must fade away. . . .<sup>60</sup>

Here was an application of the well-known ethnological theory which held that the mulatto was weaker than either of his parent stocks, often so puny that he was incapable of reproduction.<sup>61</sup> The idea was easily transferred to the Mexican. In this view, the Mexican, somewhat like the Indian, was also a vanishing American, doomed to extinction because he was weaker, less prolific, and less intelligent than his forebears. Farnham, repeating yet another familiar idea, argued that only the mixing of "superior" races would result in genetic improvements.<sup>62</sup>

The most important ethnological evaluation of Mexican character made in the ante-bellum period was that of John Russell Bartlett, who traveled throughout the Southwest as boundary commissioner from 1850 to 1853. Bartlett had been co-founder of the American Ethnological Society in 1842 and four years later published his *Progress of Ethnology*, a primer on the current state of that science throughout the world. In 1854, after his return from the Southwest, he published his *Personal Narrative* in which he

applied his intimate familiarity with current ethnological theory to the special case of the Mexican.

Bartlett was no unreconstructed bigot. Although ethnocentric and secure in the knowledge of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, he showed compassion for some of the southwestern peoples. He ascribed to various Indian tribes a degree of human dignity, enterprise, and decency. Bartlett also had praise for Mexicans of pure Spanish extraction, complimenting them for their intelligence, attractiveness, and dignity of manner. In contrast, he had only scorn for the mixed-bloods who represented, as he put it, "human wretchedness in its worst state." The ethnologist offered an explanation of the Mexican's predicament. In comparing Castilian character to that of the mestizo, he wrote:

There are a few respectable old families at El Paso. . . . A vast gulf intervenes between these Castilians and the masses, who are a mixed breed, possessing none of the virtues of their European ancestors, but all their vices, with those of the aborigines superadded. The Indian physiognomy is indelibly stamped upon them; and it required little sagacity to discriminate between the pure and the mixed race.<sup>63</sup>

As a mongrel, the Mexican was regarded by Bartlett as the most contemptible denizen of the Southwest.

Bartlett's low opinion of the Mexican's racial character was shared by other Southwestern chroniclers. William H. Emory, Bartlett's successor as boundary commissioner, argued that intermarriage was the major negative factor and wrote that the mixed progeny of white and "darker colored" races was inevitably "very inferior and syphilitic."<sup>64</sup> W. W. H. Davis, a United States attorney in Santa Fe, made the disturbing observation that the Mexican was not the product of one undesirable racial fusion but several; first, Spanish and Moor, and then Spanish-Moor and Mexican aborigine. Thus, Davis noted that the Mexican was burdened with "all the vices of those whose homes are washed by the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea" as well as "the cunning and deceit of the Indian."<sup>65</sup> J. Ross Browne, a well-known

American journalist, wrote in his *Adventures in the Apache Country* that "miscegenation has prevailed in [Sonora] for three centuries. Every generation the population grows worse; and the Sonorians [sic] may now be ranked with their natural compadres—Indians, burros, and coyotes."<sup>66</sup>

By mid-century and thereafter, Mexican stock had sunk so low in American literary chronicles that the character of the southwestern native, the Indian, positively shone. In his own right, the Indian was not much admired by western writers, but whatever his defects, they dissipated into insignificance by comparison. Thomas James, among many others, wrote in his *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans* (1846) that Indians were far superior to Mexicans in "all the qualities of a useful and meritorious population."<sup>67</sup>

Though James himself never articulated the sentiment very clearly, many denunciations of Mexican-Indian relations centered on miscegenation. The Indian had only his own vices with which to contend, while the Mexican added those of the Spaniard. The racial problem was further complicated by a cultural dilemma. Numerous western writers echoed James Fenimore Cooper's admiration for the Indian's uncompromising primitiveness, his life of nomadic freedom, his affinity for the natural world, and felt uncomfortable about the relentless destruction of that society.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, Mexicans appeared to be locked in a cultural limbo—partially civilized, but wholly corrupt—figures who simultaneously perverted both the purity of Indian savagery and that of European civilization. To many western writers, the Mexican was not only a racial mongrel but a cultural one as well and thus doubly to be abhorred.

The period from 1831 to 1869—delimited by publication of *The Personal Narratives of James O. Pattie* and J. Ross Browne's *Adventures in the Apache Country*—was one in which the image, previously of a swirling cloud of ambiguous, elusive impressions, coalesced in the American mind. The resulting image was shaped largely by American travelers who generally described the Mex-

ican as being cruel, cowardly, treacherous, immoral, indolent, and backward. These impressions became all the more entrenched as succeeding travelers borrowed attitudes of their predecessors, restated them, and thus reinforced them. In many cases, later American travelers depicted Mexican character precisely as they expected to find it.<sup>69</sup>

The travelers' impressions of Mexican character, widely circulated as they were, left an indelible imprint on the American mind. In some cases, the impact was indirect. For example, many writers of western fiction of the period and thereafter, having no personal acquaintance with Mexicans themselves, relied heavily on travel narratives for their characterizations.<sup>70</sup> Generally, fictional Mexicans like those in the travel literature were of two varieties: the sinister, mestizo scoundrel, and, less frequently, the decadent "Castilian" romantic. Eventually, both types became familiar figures in American popular culture, appearing in countless paperback, movie, and television westerns.<sup>71</sup>

The western and Mexican travel narratives—written by various Americans from different regions, occupations, and social classes—provide important insights into nineteenth century American impressions of Mexican character and culture. Diverse as the travelers were, their attitudes toward Mexicans were remarkably similar. This general revulsion can be attributed largely to the persistent influences of American hispanophobia, anti-Catholic sentiment, racial prejudice, and ethnocentrism. This last quality was pervasive among Yanqui travelers and thus especially pernicious. Frequently, travelers denigrated Mexicans essentially because they were unlike themselves. The Americans were not satisfied simply to describe the Mexicans, but, secure in their feeling of superiority, wished to stand in moral judgment of them.<sup>72</sup> Yanqui writers seldom understood that it was one thing to suggest that Mexicans did not esteem work as much as the Americans, and quite another to label them simply indolent.<sup>73</sup> Another impediment to accurate characterizations was the propensity toward reckless generalizations. Encountering villains such as Santa Anna or George Ken-

dall's notorious Salezar, they would presume all Mexicans to be scoundrels.

A final consideration affecting American attitudes toward the Mexican is that Yanqui writers began traveling in Mexico at a time when the United States sought a foil for national expansion. To justify destruction of Mexican life in the West, American writers felt compelled to portray Mexicans as villainous and decadent. In those areas where American outrages were greatest and where confrontations between Yanquis and Mexicans were bloodiest—Texas as a case in point—the emergent portraits of Mexican character were most damaging. This is not to say that all denunciations of Mexican actions were baseless, but rather to suggest that American writers came to observe the Mexicans at a time when they were prepared to hate him.<sup>74</sup>

## NOTES

1. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 20 vols. (Washington, 1905), 12: 263.
2. The term Yanqui is used here as commonly applied in Latin America; that is, to denote simply a citizen of the United States with no implication of regionalism or disparagement.
3. *The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie* (1831; reprinted [rpt.] Cleveland, 1905), p. 220.
4. For example, H. H. Bancroft stated flatly that Pattie was guilty of numerous exaggerations and distortions. See Bancroft's *History of California*, 7 vols. (San Francisco, 1888), 3:171-82. William H. Goetzmann called Pattie's *Narrative* "one of the documents of American mythology." See "Introduction" to *The Personal Narrative*. . . (Philadelphia, 1962), p. ix.
5. Albert Pike, "Narrative of a Journey in the Prairie," in David J. Weber, ed., *Prose Sketches and Poems, Written in the Western Country, with Additional Stories* (Albuquerque, 1967), p. 7.
6. Pike, "Narrative," p. 275.
7. Pike, "Narrative," p. 262.
8. Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies* (1844; rpt. Norman, Oklahoma, 1954), p. 154.
9. Gregg, *Commerce*, p. 141.

10. See Philip W. Powell, *Tree of Hate* (New York, 1971) for a study of American hispanophobia.

11. See David Levin, *History as Romantic Art* (Stanford, 1959), pp. 93-125, and Ray Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860* (New York, 1938) for studies of American anti-Catholic sentiment.

12. Gregg, like many other travelers in New Mexico, was disturbed by the *penitentes*, a small band of Catholic zealots given to self-flagellation. See Gregg, *Commerce*, p. 181.

13. (1833; rpt., Austin, 1935), p. 128.

14. William Preston Stapp, *The Prisoners of Perote* (1845; rpt., Austin, 1935), p. 2.

15. *The Evolution of a State: or Recollections of Old Texas Days* (Austin, 1900), p. 131.

16. (New York, 1844), 1:365.

17. Kendall, *Narrative*, 1:292.

18. *Journal of the Texan Expedition Against Mier* (1845; rpt., Austin, 1935), p. 292.

19. Green, *Journal*, p. 265.

20. Green, *Journal*, p. 269.

21. Many Mexican War narratives contain references to the Anglo Texan reports of Mexican barbarism. For example, William C. Carpenter in his *Travels and Adventures in Mexico* (New York, 1851), p. 52-53, 70-71, indicates that his belief in Mexican treachery and cruelty was shaped by Texan narratives.

22. (1840; rpt., New York, 1964), p. 128.

23. Dana, *Mast*, p. 128.

24. Dana, *Mast*, p. 78.

25. *Life in California* (1846; rpt., New York, 1964), p. 142.

26. Robinson, *Life*, p. 73.

27. (1850; rpt., Stanford, 1949), p. 222.

28. *Eldorado* (1850; rpt., New York, 1949), p. 109.

29. The notion of racial purity was by no means unanimously accepted by visitors to California. Edwin Bryant, in *What I Saw in California* (1848), wrote that the mixing of races in that area was "very perceptible." Albert Gilliam and Thomas Farnham, two writers discussed in this article, concurred. The myth of racial purity in California reached its fullest and most popular expression in the late nineteenth century fiction of Bert Harte, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Gertrude Atherton.

30. *Recollections of Mexico* (New York, 1846), p. 23.

31. Thompson, *Recollections*, p. vi.

32. Thompson, *Recollections*, p. 80.

33. (Philadelphia, 1846), p. 168.
34. Gilliam, *Tablelands*, p. 69.
35. Gilliam, *Tablelands*, p. 83.
36. Gilliam, *Tablelands*, p. 134.
37. 3rd. ed. (Philadelphia, 1847), p. 292.
38. Mayer, *As It Was*, p. 292.
39. Mayer, *As It Was*, p. 294.
40. (1848; rpt., Topeka, 1907), p. 130.
41. Hughes, *Doniphan's*, p. 316.
42. *A Campaign in New Mexico with Colonel Doniphan* (Philadelphia, 1848), p. 132. This sentiment that any further degradation of Mexican character would disqualify them from the ranks of humankind was expressed again by another veteran of the Mexican War, J. B. Robinson. He wrote that the Mexican "had sunk so low in the scale of depravity and degradation that further depression was impossible. . . ." See his *Reminiscences of a Campaign in Mexico* (Nashville, 1849), p. 12. On the other hand, some American reporters argued that the Mexican was sub-human. A New York newspaper likened fighting Mexicans to "coon-hunting"; during the War, Mexicans were often called "reptiles" or "beasts."
43. Edwards, *Campaign in New Mexico*, p. 50.
44. Edwards, *Campaign in New Mexico*, p. 156. American barbarism in the war apparently equaled that of the Mexicans despite Yanqui claims of inordinate Mexican brutality. See Stephen B. Oates, "Los Diablos Tejanos," in his *Visions of Glory* (Norman, 1970), pp. 25-52.
45. "Journal of Marcellus B. Edwards," in Ralph Beiber, ed., *Marching With the Army of the West, 1846-1848* (Glendale, 1936), p. 275.
46. *Campaign Sketches Of A War With Mexico* (Nashville, 1849), p. 12.
47. *The Campaign of General Scott in the Valley of Mexico* (Cincinnati, 1852), p. 72.
48. *Memoirs of A Tour to Northern Mexico* (1848; rpt., Albuquerque, 1969), p. 27.
49. Edwards, *Campaign in New Mexico*, p. 50.
50. While applauding their beauty and charm, American soldiers were careful to point out that the swarthy señoritas were no match for the fair-skinned beauties of the North. See, for example, Semmes, *The Campaign of General Scott*, p. 78.
51. Quoted in Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny* (1935; rpt., Chicago, 1963), p. 173.
52. *Rocky Mountain Life* (Boston, 1858), p. 211.



53. For a discussion of this situation see Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey Through Texas* (New York, 1857). Another factor in the frequently-stated analogies between Mexican and Negro was the well-known fact that the African slaves brought by the Spaniards to colonial Mexico had by mid-nineteenth century been absorbed into the general population.

54. Samuel Hammett, *Piney Woods Tavern* (Philadelphia, 1858), p. 282. It should be noted that in nineteenth century fiction, "nigger" was a general term of opprobrium and not assigned to the Negro exclusively. An Irishman, for example, might be called a "white nigger."

55. *Prairie and Rocky Mountain Life on the California and Oregon Trail*, 3rd. ed. (Columbus, Ohio, 1857), p. 360.

56. The foremost scholar of early nineteenth century American racial theory is William Stanton. This discussion draws heavily from his *The Leopard's Spots* (Chicago, 1960).

57. Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia, 1855), p. 407.

58. In his *History of America*, 4 vols. (London, 1777), Robertson presented the view that the Spanish colonists in the New World were generally corrupt and degraded while the Mexican Indians were the most savage of the New World aborigines. Robertson's work was heavily influential on such scholars as William H. Prescott and H. H. Bancroft.

59. William Shaler, "Journal of a Voyage Between China and the North-Western Coast of America Made in 1804," *American Register*, 3:1 (1808), pp. 137-75.

60. *Life, Adventures, and Travels in California*, 2nd. ed. (New York, 1849), p. 413.

61. See Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots*, pp. 66-68, 190.

62. Nott and Gliddon, *Types of Mankind*, p. 69. See also Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots*, p. 160.

63. *Personal Narrative* . . . (1854; rpt., Chicago, 1965), 2:74.

64. *Report of the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey* (2 vols., Washington, 1857), 1:69-70.

65. *El Gringo* (1857; rpt., Chicago, 1962), pp. 83, 85.

66. (New York, 1869), p. 172. Only a few Yanqui travelers—notably Albert Gilliam—considered racial mixing to be desirable.

67. (1846; rpt., Philadelphia, 1962), p. 87.

68. See Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization* (Baltimore, 1965) for a study of American attitudes toward the Indian.

69. The attitudes of American travelers toward Mexicans took a positive turn during the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910) but most of the compliments were directed at Díaz himself—who was trying to "modern-

ize" Mexico after European and American standards—and not the people, who remained objects of denigration and condescension. There were, however, two notably sensitive studies of Mexican character by American visitors during the Díaz era: Charles Flandrau's *Viva Mexico!* (1908) and John Kenneth Turner's *Barbarous Mexico* (1910).

70. In some cases, fiction writers borrowed much more than characterizations, plagiarizing whole scenes and episodes from the narratives. The most famous case of plagiarism in this period involved the English writer Frederick Marryat who allegedly stole from George W. Kendall and Josiah Gregg, among others. See Marilyn M. Sibley, *Travelers in Texas, 1760-1860* (Austin, 1967), pp. 19-21.

71. The swarthy Mexican villain remained the most popular Mexican stereotype in the United States until well into the twentieth century, an image greatly revitalized by American depictions of the Mexican revolutionaries of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. The Mexican image began to soften about 1920, tending toward a less virulent caricature, a combination of traits of the mestizo scoundrel and the decadent Castilian. John Steinbeck's celebrated *paisanos* of *Tortilla Flat*—friendly and humorous but also lazy, unpredictable, and violent—are examples of this hybrid figure. See also Arthur G. Petit, "The Decline and Fall of New Mexican Great House in the Novels of Harvey Fergusson," *New Mexico Historical Review*, 51:3 (July 1976), pp. 173-92. It should be noted, however, that the rascally Mexican caricature still enjoys a lively career in American popular culture, as in the western movies of Sam Peckinpah.

Another way in which travelers' accounts of Mexican character have influenced later American attitudes is through their use as primary sources by historians of the West and Mexico. For example, a distinguished contemporary historian, Ray Allen Billington, relying heavily on travel literature, repeats the myth of an "idyllic, indolent" California past in *The Far Western Frontier* (New York, 1956), p. 5-13.

72. Leonard Pitt makes this point about the California writers in *The Decline of the Californios* (Berkeley, 1966), p. 14.

73. This characteristic quality of ethnocentrism, of course, was closely related to the well-documented contemporary surge of nativism.

74. Interestingly, Mexican attitudes towards Americans were not nearly so harsh. See Gene M. Brack, "Imperious Neighbor: The Mexican View of the United States, 1821-1846," (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1967).